

SUSTAINABILITY AWARD



2026

Award-winning
Projects



On behalf of

-  Federal Ministry
Women, Science
and Research
Republic of Austria
-  Federal Ministry
Agriculture and Forestry, Climate
and Environmental Protection,
Regions and Water Management
Republic of Austria



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and

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The Austrian Sustainability Award for Institutions of Higher Education

History and Background

The Austrian Sustainability Award is a joint initiative of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management and the Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research and was established in 2007 as a means of promoting and increasing awareness for sustainability processes within Austrian higher education institutions. As centres of innovation and education, they play an important role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainability Award serves both as recognition for outstanding achievements, and as an incentive for other institutions to intensify their efforts. The Sustainability Award has been presented biannually since 2008. The award is coordinated by Forum Umweltbildung, a key institution for education for sustainable development in Austria.

Characteristics

The Sustainability Award recognises projects that promote the transformation to a sustainable society in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (SDGs). This can be achieved through creative research approaches, development in science and of the arts, encouraging teaching and learning methods, inclusive concepts for the whole institution, education for sus-

tainable development and for climate protection as well as dialogue with society and politics.

The award has a holistic organisational development approach and is addressed to all higher education institution members regardless of role, function and area of activity, for example students, lecturers, researchers, administrative staff and regional decision-makers.

In 2026, the prize is awarded in the following four categories:

- Learning
- Researching
- Anchoring
- Cooperating

An independent jury assessed the projects submitted and selected the nominees. In each category one project is honoured in gold and two in silver. The evaluation criteria included creativity, innovation and exemplary character of the submitted projects. Also their transformative impact was evaluated, taking into account whether the project extends beyond the institution and at what level (awareness, behavioural patterns, system, mental concepts) the impact is achieved. The Sustainability Award is endowed with a total of € 20,000 in 2026.

Looking back, looking forward

Until 2007, sustainability initiatives at Austrian universities and institutions of higher education were isolated from one another and did not always receive the attention they deserved. In 2008, when the Sustainability Award was presented for the first time, the winners were selected from 43 projects. In the following years, the figures remained relatively stable with approx. 80 submitted projects.

The year 2024 saw a relaunch of the award with new categories and a whole-day event of networking, project presentations and the award ceremony. Furthermore, a new record of 181 submitted projects was set. In 2026, 133 projects were submitted and a new trophy was created. This year's networking event and award ceremony took place on June 9th, 2026.

The Sustainability Award is also recognised beyond Austria's borders and serves as a model for similar initiatives across Europe. The biennial rhythm will be maintained, and the next round of the Sustainability Award is scheduled to take place in 2028. You can find the latest information on our website (German only): www.sustainability-award.at



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Federal Minister of Women,
Science and Research
Eva-Maria Holzleitner, BSc

 Federal Ministry
Women, Science
and Research
Republic of Austria

Knowledge creates the future – this idea runs like a red thread through the big questions of our time. The climate crisis, biodiversity loss, social tensions, digital upheavals and geopolitical uncertainties make it clear that our decisions today determine what the world of tomorrow will look like. In order for there to be a liveable, democratic and just future for all, we need strong science, well-equipped universities and people who are willing to take responsibility.

Sustainable development means much more than climate protection and resource conservation. It encompasses economic stability, social security, cultural diversity, democratic participation and gender equality in equal measure. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda reflect this broad aspiration. Our universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education are central places for their implementation: they are knowledge hubs, drivers of innovation and democratic places of learning all in one.

With the Sustainability Award, we are focusing on these achievements. The submitted projects impressively show how diverse and creative sustainability is lived at Austria's universities: in teaching, which enables students to understand complex relationships and make responsible decisions; in research, which opens up new paths for climate protection, resource conservation, social justice and digitisation in the sense of the common good; and in higher education governance, which is increasingly anchoring sustainability as a guiding principle of institutional action.

It is particularly important here that sustainability is understood as a cross-cutting issue – not as an additional task, but as part of modern university development. The large number of interdisciplinary and cross-university collaborations shows that we can only solve the big questions of our time together. When students, teachers, researchers, administration and partner institutions from society and business work together, the innovative power we need for a just transformation is created. The Sustainability Award has evolved in recent years to do justice to this contemporary understanding of sustainability. It creates space for exchange, mutual learning and new partnerships. In this way, individual projects become impulses that have an impact far beyond their own institution and strengthen the science and higher education system as a whole.

I would like to thank everyone who submitted projects for their commitment. They show that science and research do not take place in an ivory tower, but work in the middle of society and take responsibility for future generations. I would like to congratulate the award winners very warmly. With your work, you make a significant contribution to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and to the sustainable design of our universities – and thus to Austria's future viability.



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Federal Minister of Agriculture and Forestry,
Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions
and Water Management
Mag. Norbert Totschnig, MSc

 Federal Ministry
Agriculture and Forestry, Climate
and Environmental Protection,
Regions and Water Management
Republic of Austria

In the face of multiple global crises, we in Europe and Austria are currently facing particularly significant challenges. The public debate is dominated by wars, fluctuating commodity and energy prices, inflation, and supply chain issues, and this is causing people to feel anxious. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, the current difficult situation, it is important for us in Austria to look ahead and continue steadfastly on the path toward sustainability. In doing so, the protection of climate, environment, and biodiversity are key priorities, while a competitive economy and the transition to sustainable industry and a circular economy remain the cornerstones of our actions. This is necessary not only to leave future generations a livable planet, but also to make us resilient to crises and secure against threats right now, in the present. These aspects are fundamental for society as a whole – from politics to economy and science to civil society – so that we can work together toward a good future for all.

Austrian universities and colleges play a key role in addressing major challenges and current questions about the future. As centres for research and innovation, they are driving forces behind the sustainable transformation of both economy and society. As institutions that educate future decision-makers, they equip students with the tools to actively shape climate protection and resource conservation. In doing so, they make a major contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

This is precisely where the Sustainability Award has been making an impact for many years. This award recognises outstanding projects from Austrian universities and colleges that address the complex interrelationships of sustainable development in innovative, creative, and effective ways. In 2026, the renowned expert jury nominated a total of twelve outstanding projects from

133 submissions. The Sustainability Award highlights how broadly the topic of sustainability is already being implemented at Austrian universities and colleges and serves as constant motivation to work on new concepts and to fulfill our responsibility toward society and the environment.

I would especially like to thank all the applicants who once again submitted innovative and remarkable projects, all the award winners who are doing outstanding pioneering work in the field of sustainability, and the expert jury composed of specialists from various fields – including Hildegard Aichberger (Austrian Federal Environment Agency), Daniel Fischer (Leuphana University Lüneburg), Jakob Mohl (Austrian National Commission for UNESCO), Sithara Pathirana (Festival Director, Vienna Climate Biennale), Klaus Taschwer (Der Standard), and Eric Veulliet (Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences) – who had the honorable and difficult task of selecting the best projects from among all those submitted.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Sustainability Award, I would like to encourage and invite everyone to continue working together on future-proof and sustainable solutions aimed at promoting sustainable development in Austria and around the world. Only in this way can we manage our economies and live our lives in a crisis-proof and resilient manner.

AWARD WINNERS CATEGORY LEARNING

GOLD

Master's degree in architecture – Ready for the construction revolution
– Carinthia University of Applied Sciences



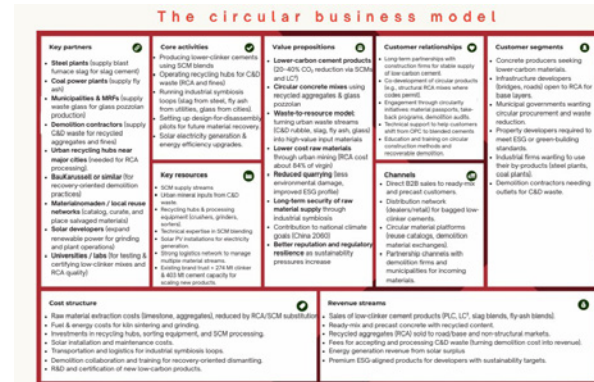
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Of course, we cannot continue building as we have done in the past! The master's program "Fit for the bau-WENDE" at Carinthia University of Applied Sciences qualifies students for the transformation of the construction industry. It combines challenge-based project work with profound theory and addresses climate-friendly design, resource efficiency, and social participation. The curriculum is divided into three thematic tracks: Dialogue culture ("Building with Everyone") strengthens participatory process architecture and cooperation with municipalities, cities, and local communities. Retrofitting culture ("Building with Existing Structures") focuses on continued construction, reuse, and circular strategies in existing structures. Material culture ("Building with Wood") teaches resource-conscious construction with renewable raw materials in regional value creation. Our students are "unlearning" the design of greenfield developments, retail parks in the commuter belt, and concrete monoliths as replacement builds ("unlearn CO₂").

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SILVER

Course: Multinational Corporations and Circular Economy
– WU Vienna



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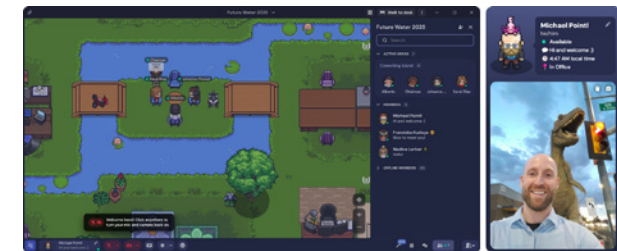
In times of rapidly worsening global climate conditions, leadership needs to develop capabilities to counteract the circularity gap. It is obvious that the economic actions of a couple of hundred MNCs are changed more easily than the mindset of millions of people. To teach these capabilities, the university course has been conceptualised: Using case-study research, students analyze the value chain and operating models of linear multinational firms, assessing their potential for circular redesign, benchmarking them against best-practice examples, and remodelling the business into a circular one.

The take-aways for students are threefold: First, to gain a better understanding of the theories of circular economy as well as systems design, and international circular economies. Second, to comparatively analyze and benchmark the potential for economic, ecological and social change, and third, to apply theoretic knowledge to real business models.

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SILVER

Future Water 2025
– Inter-institutional project



© Michael Pointl

Future Water is an international online learning format for future decision-makers in sustainable water management. Students from all continents work for one semester in self-organized, interdisciplinary teams on realistic Water Management Challenges that address complex issues in water supply and wastewater treatment. The aim is to develop integrated technical, political, and economic solutions in the context of global challenges such as climate change and aging infrastructure. Coordinated by Graz University of Technology and the University of Arizona, the teams collaborate with mentors on digital platforms such as Gather Town and attend lectures on current research topics, transcultural collaboration, communication, and AI. The results are presented in town halls to academic audiences, decision-makers, and the public. The best solutions were recognized in late 2025 and are promoted via social media.

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AWARD WINNERS CATEGORY RESEARCHING

GOLD

TealHelix
– BOKU University



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The TealHelix research project addresses transparent sustainability labelling of food. The focus is on the scientific development of a new psychometric online tool that compares personal consumption preferences with quantitative sustainability assessments. The online tool is intended to transparently communicate to consumers the impact that their food choices have on different sustainability dimensions. Environmental criteria (e.g. water consumption), workers' rights (e.g. health insurance) and animal welfare standards (e.g. short transport routes) as well as health and economic aspects (e.g. vitamin content and affordability of food) are considered. The online tool assists consumers in comparing different products with each other and enables informed purchases. Overall, the project strives to reach vulnerable consumer groups and to establish standards for transparent sustainability labels throughout Europe.

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Klagenfurt goes climate-neutral – Participation and Justice in the City of the Future
– University of Klagenfurt



© Sabine Ebner

The project “Klagenfurt Goes Climate-Neutral – Participation and Justice in the City of the Future” is conducted by the Department for Cultural Analysis and the Department for Teaching and School Development at the University of Klagenfurt. It aims to support the city of Klagenfurt on its path toward climate neutrality through a collaborative research approach. Working with three schools, the city administration, the youth council, and the ÖKOLOG network, the project addresses two main aspects: First, pupils use ethnographic methods to investigate how the needs and interests of different social groups in the city are articulated, prioritised, and negotiated in the context of climate policy. Second, the project treats pupils themselves as central actors directly affected by the climate crisis. The results will inform both urban and school development and will also be shared through the ÖKOLOG network, thereby reaching more than 800 schools.

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Working Group Sustainability Research
– BOKU University



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The BOKU Working Group Sustainability Research was founded in 2020 on the initiative of the BOKU Vice-Rectorate for Research. About 20 researchers from various disciplines work on the following goals: promote sustainability-relevant research proactively, consolidate exchange and cooperation, spearhead sustainability discourse, accompany the implementation of the strategic BOKU sustainability goals and advise the Rectorate on research and sustainability. The working group organises public discussions, e.g. on slow science or research assessment. It developed an “Action Plan for Career Paths in Transformative Research at BOKU”, highlighting which levels need to be addressed: structures, assessment criteria, networking and competence development – and supports their implementation. With BOKU's accession to the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, the topic of evaluation criteria is also actively pursued – a subgroup of the NHF working group deals specifically with the needs of sustainability research.

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AWARD WINNERS CATEGORY COOPERATING

GOLD

BeEcoVie II - Project for a sustainable bee-friendly spatial planning
– Inter-institutional project



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BeEcoVie investigates and offers solutions for honeybees and wild bees to coexist in urban habitats. It has become increasingly popular to manage honeybees in cities. Although they offer nature experiences, they potentially increase the competition as flowering resources are limited in cities. Many wild bees are specialised pollinators and threatened. In BeEcoVie 1, the number of colonies in Vienna was extrapolated and all wild bee records published since 1990 were collected. In the interdisciplinary follow-up project (BeEcoVie 2), the AI-supported tool hive.city is going to be developed aiming to support beekeepers and the city administration with data on foraging supply, site density and the ecological carrying capacity. The aim is to promote sustainable beekeeping with appropriate colony numbers, the protection of urban biodiversity and the enhancement of urban habitats through flower-rich areas. The results will be incorporated into consulting, education and urban planning.

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New Horizon
– University College of Agricultural and Environmental Education (HAUP)



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Together with the University of Tabora in Tanzania and Manus Dei Secondary School in Kibwigwa, Tanzania, the University College of Agricultural and Environmental Education (HAUP) is developing innovative teaching and learning settings to strengthen environmental and agricultural education in Tanzania. Teachers and students from universities in Tanzania and Austria work together in seminars at the Kibwigwa site to develop learning scenarios which they then test with the pupils on site. After this one-day seminar which is held twice a year, there is an opportunity to practise the methods and didactics in everyday school life with the support of two HAUP students who are completing their four-week school internship on site. This ensures continuous support. This project led to the development of the first faculty in the field of agricultural sciences, technology and environmental education in Tanzania at the Tabora campus of AMUCTA University.

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SILVER

smartIBK – my life in the smart city Innsbruck
– University of Innsbruck



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In the FFG Talente regional project smartIBK, students from six schools in Innsbruck spent two years exploring how their city can be made smart, livable, and future-proof. Through workshops and excursions – from energy treasure hunts to the water cycle and urban space design – the children not only learned about technical and ecological connections but also took an active role in shaping their city. They used scientific measuring tools, developed ideas for climate-friendly public spaces, planned smart buildings, and designed green outdoor classrooms.

The goal was to empower young people to understand the challenges of a smart city and to give them the tools to create their own solutions – for sustainability, climate adaptation, and democratic participation. All teaching materials developed in the project are openly accessible, and the results were showcased in a public exhibition. smartIBK makes the future tangible – and demonstrates: a smart city emerges when we imagine and design it.

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AWARD WINNERS CATEGORY ANCHORING

GOLD

greenCCR – cure cancer sustainably
– Medical University of Vienna



© greenCCR

greenCCR aims to systematically embed sustainability at the Center for Cancer Research (CCR) of the Medical University of Vienna in the long run. Its approach is based on the recognition that sustainable change can only be achieved through coordinated, interest-based action by all stakeholders. greenCCR combines structural measures with awareness-raising and active employee participation. A step-by-step, inclusive approach ensures that all people are met where they are, with critical voices deliberately included. Research groups and service units are involved in the implementation of sustainability strategies through voluntary delegates. The focus is on raising awareness, sustainable use of consumables and energy resources, and internal and external networking. Successful measures are continuously developed, translated into standardized processes, and institutionally anchored. As a result, sustainability becomes not a project-based effort but a permanent part of everyday research life.

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SILVER

True-Costs: Facilitating preferences for plant based diets in corporate catering
– University of Salzburg



© Uni Salzburg

The “VeggieMonth” was initiated by the University of Salzburg (PLUS), in collaboration with the Austrian Mensen.at company, to address the urgent need for a sustainable shift in dietary habits. Meat heavy diets contribute to global warming, biodiversity loss and poor animal welfare. More directly, they affect individual employee and student health: the Austrian Nutrition Recommendations recommend limiting meat consumption to one portion per week. The project’s goal was to motivate and promote meat-free consumption among students and staff by introducing a 2 Euro price reduction on veg* meals during several intervention phases in 2024 and 2025. This incentive dramatically increased sales: the share of vegetarian meals sold rose from 53% (baseline) to peaks exceeding 80%. Crucially, the project achieved a sustained, transformative effect (e.g., above baseline percentages several months post-intervention). Mensen.at responded by permanently implementing a 5 € vegan dish targeted mainly at students.

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SILVER

Sustainable Research Labs: From Awareness to Action – Institute of Science and Technology Austria (ISTA)



© ISTA

Experimental research has a substantial environmental footprint, further amplified by the growing use of AI and other computational tools. To monitor resource use, raise awareness, and reduce our lab footprint, a Lab Certification Program was established at ISTA promoting sustainable lab practices. Using LEAF (developed by University College London) and Green Disc (from the Software Sustainability Institute, Cambridge), the team assesses lab footprints and tracks savings from ongoing initiatives. In 2024, 12 experimental labs participated in the pilot. Following its success, the program now includes 15 experimental labs and one computational lab. Through energy reduction, equipment and consumables sharing, and more efficient computing, the team has started to lower the labs’ footprint. The goal is to expand the program in the upcoming years to include all experimental and computer-based labs, amplifying the impact and be in line with the funders’ sustainability criteria.

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